

Alexander Petrovich Kazhdan

1922–1997

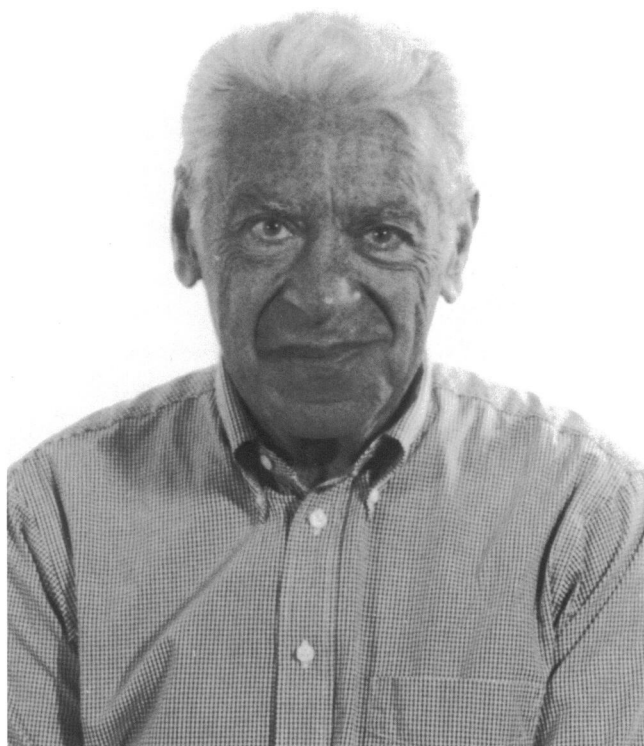
The world of Byzantinists lost one of its greatest scholars, and Dumbarton Oaks was deprived of a beloved and distinguished colleague when Alexander Kazhdan died suddenly on May 29, 1997, the five hundred forty-fourth anniversary of the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks.

Born in Moscow, Kazhdan graduated from the Pedagogical Institute at Ufa (Bashkortostan), in 1942, and then entered the University of Moscow, where he did his graduate work with the medievalist Evgenij Kosminskij; his dissertation, on agrarian relations in Byzantium in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, was published in 1952. Although his poor eyesight spared him from military service during World War II, the 1940s and 1950s were difficult times in the Soviet Union, and Kazhdan held positions at provincial pedagogical institutes and the college of Velikije Luki, until he was able to return to Moscow in 1956. He then worked at the Institute for History of the Academy of Sciences, up to his departure from the Soviet Union in 1978. Despite the professional difficulties he encountered, his productivity was astounding: his bibliography through 1978 lists 555 items (including reviews of books and articles).¹ Some of this work was in the form of monographs, and a good deal consisted of articles, many of which appeared in *Vizantijskij vremennik* and *Voprosy istorii*. The reviews, quite apart from their intrinsic worth, served to acquaint the Soviet scholarly public with the work of Western historians, even as he exposed the Western world to the writings of Soviet scholars in a series of publications entitled “La byzantinologie soviétique,” which began to appear in 1968 in *Byzantion*.

By the time Kazhdan emigrated to the United States, most of his fundamental concepts had been elaborated, and a good deal of his path-breaking work had been written, a fact that should not surprise, since he was, at that point, fifty-seven years old. His most important early works were on agrarian relations; here he was in venerable company, in the line of great Russian historians who essentially wrote the agrarian history of Byzantium until the 1930s. Still valuable for the wealth of information they provide, Kazhdan's books on this subject were conceptually tied to the idea of the feudalization of agrarian relations in Byzantium. After he came to the United States, he did not use the vocabulary of feudalism very often; indeed, he once wrote that “it may be wise to avoid the term.”² Eventually, he came to believe in a modified form of the concept: in “State, Feudal, and

¹ See the bibliography of his works up to 1991 collected in his Festschrift volume, *DOP* 46 (1992), 5–26.

² A. Kazhdan and G. Constable, *People and Power in Byzantium: An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies* (Washington, D.C., 1982), 120.



Private Economy in Byzantium,” published in *DOP* 47 (1993), he speaks of “feudal or quasi-feudal features of Byzantine land property.”

Kazhdan’s early interest in agrarian relations diversified very quickly, and he became one of the broadest historians of Byzantium, writing on the aristocracy, on cities, on the economy, on culture and literature, on the Church, and on hagiography. His article on Byzantine cities in the seventh to eleventh centuries, published in *Sovetskaja archeologija* in 1954, provoked a great deal of debate and a response from Georg Ostrogorsky, among others. The point at issue was the survival or otherwise of cities in the middle Byzantine period: Kazhdan first supported the value of archaeology and numismatics as a source of evidence on this issue and, second, promoted the idea based on such evidence that there was a discontinuity in urban existence starting in the seventh century. That, he argued then, and argued thereafter, signified a great break in the history of Byzantium. Some of the evidence he used has been disputed, but in general terms this particular aspect of discontinuity has become current orthodoxy. It informed Kazhdan’s insistence, presented in many different ways, that Byzantium was a society much more interesting than that envisaged by the scholars who see it as a long continuation of late antiquity, that it was a medieval society, a new society in many ways, much like the societies that formed western medieval Europe. Thus, Byzantium ceases to be a historical anomaly, and becomes a society with siblings, whose development may be compared, contrasted, and seen in conjunction with that of other medieval societies.

The other major work that is widely known in the West (despite Kazhdan’s complaint that “Russica sunt, non leguntur”) is his study of the structure of the Byzantine ruling class in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (1974),³ a classic of its kind, whose importance, interest, and influence were to be long lasting. In that path-breaking work, he dissected the Byzantine aristocracy and changed our views about its realities. The book is, among other things, a statistical study, based on prosopographical material, gathered and analyzed in what we came to know as his method: the painstaking gathering of information, on which analysis and novel interpretations are then built. An Italian translation, the first in any western European language, is scheduled for publication shortly.

In 1971 Kazhdan published a long article, not widely known and rarely cited, that dealt with the economic realities of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁴ It teems with information collected from dispersed source material, and constitutes an important contribution on his part to the economic history of that period.

Kazhdan’s interest in the eleventh and twelfth centuries was all-encompassing; it included not only social and economic history but also the history of literature, and that from early on. He wrote remarkable essays on the personalities and ideological premises of a number of major writers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. They were eventually translated into English, revised, and published, in collaboration with Simon Franklin, as *Studies on Byzantine Literature of the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (1984). It is a long way from these excellent studies to the desire to write a history of all of Byzantine literature, a project in which Kazhdan was engaged when he died, but the seeds are certainly there, in those studies and a host of others.

³*Social’nyj sostav gosподstvujuščego klassa Vizantii XI–XII vv.* (Moscow, 1974).

⁴“Iz ekonomičeskoj žizni Vizantii XI–XII vv.,” *Vizantijskie očerki* 2 (1971), 169–212.

Kazhdan began a new phase of his life in 1978, when he emigrated from the Soviet Union, a few years after the departure for the United States of his son, David, who had been appointed professor of mathematics at Harvard University. Following a brief transitional period in Paris, Kazhdan arrived at Dumbarton Oaks in February 1979 to take up the position of senior research associate, which he was to hold for the rest of his life. He was preceded by his personal library and card files which he had managed with great difficulty to mail from the Soviet Union in small brown paper packets or entrusted to various European diplomatic friends to smuggle out in embassy pouches.

In many respects, Kazhdan thrived in his new environment. He greatly enjoyed walking in the gardens of Dumbarton Oaks and in the nearby Rock Creek Park, and he took much pleasure in weekend excursions to Great Falls or Harper's Ferry or Prince William Forest, where he would walk with family, friends, and colleagues and pick mushrooms. The hospitality proffered by Kazhdan and his wife, Moussia, was warm and generous, the dinners enlivened by bountiful amounts of vodka and good conversation. At Dumbarton Oaks Kazhdan was free to pursue his own intellectual interests without the interference or censorship of party representatives, and he continued to publish at an amazing rate during his eighteen years in residence. He had daily access to a superb library and the Western publications so hard to find in the Soviet Union, and few obligations except to carry out his own research program.

At the same time, adjustment to a new culture and language in the United States was not easy for Kazhdan; but he was determined from the outset to immerse himself in the intellectual life of Dumbarton Oaks and to master English as best he could. During his first year in Washington, he would arise at dawn to watch "Sunrise Semester" on television, trying to understand American accents, enjoying especially the lectures on Plato. Even before his arrival he had begun to write articles and lectures in English, and from 1978 on he published primarily in his adopted language. It was always a struggle for him to write in English, but he persevered, seeking continually to expand his vocabulary through frequent consultation of *Rogel's Thesaurus* and *Webster's Dictionary*.

During his years at Dumbarton Oaks, Kazhdan developed further many of the themes he had already explored in his earlier career. From his seminal work on the aristocracy flowed a series of other studies on the ideology of the aristocracy and on the imperial ideal. Kazhdan's enduring interest in the twelfth century, which he and others, too, have been in the process of rehabilitating, culminated in *Change in Byzantine Culture in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (1985), co-authored with Ann Wharton Epstein. In his later years, the focus of his interests shifted more clearly, not only to the history of the ruling classes, but to the superstructure—Byzantine ideology and culture. It may seem strange, but it is nonetheless true that this man, who was anything but inclined toward religion, brought to the forefront the work of the great mystic Symeon the New Theologian, on whom his first publication dates back to 1967, with a second article in 1982. His involvement with hagiography, which had begun with his Russian translation of the Life of Patriarch Euthymios of Constantinople in 1959,⁵ intensified in the 1980s with his sys-

⁵"Psamafijskaja hronika: Predislovie, perevod i kommentarij," in *Dve vizantijskie hroniki X veka* (Moscow, 1959), 7–140. It is characteristic of the constraints under which Kazhdan worked in the 1950s that he was forced to call the *vita* of Euthymios a "chronicle" in order to get his translation published.

tematic reading of all hagiographic sources on saints of the first to tenth centuries. His absorbing interest in literature led him to read exhaustively in fields new to him, such as homiletics and hymnography.

Kazhdan's presence at Dumbarton Oaks made a major impact on its ever-changing community of Byzantine scholars. In conversation and in more formal seminars on agrarian history and Byzantine literature, he introduced his colleagues to Russian and Soviet historiography and bibliography. He served as mentor to many fellows and staff members, suggesting bibliography, criticizing methodology, and challenging conclusions; he was always willing to read a colleague's article or book chapter in draft form, returning it usually within twenty-four hours copiously annotated with penciled comments. His generosity toward his fellow scholars was legendary; one had only to ask and he would locate a bibliographic reference or a relevant passage from a saint's Life in his celebrated boxes of minuscule cards. Kazhdan was a frequent contributor to colloquia and symposia at Dumbarton Oaks, especially in the 1990s, when he was released from the pressures of editorial work on the *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (1991). Between 1991 and 1997 he gave papers at six of the seven symposia held, on topics as varied as law, Italian cities, hagiography, the Byzantine court, and the Crusades.

Another way in which Kazhdan left a permanent mark on Dumbarton Oaks was through his championship of collaborative enterprises, of scholarly teamwork. The books and articles he co-authored with colleagues, starting as early as 1982, are one testament to his cooperative spirit. His *People and Power*, written with Giles Constable, and now in its third impression, encapsulates his views on Byzantine society and culture. It has made the concept of "homo Byzantinus" a commonplace in our field. "Continuity and Change,"⁶ written with Anthony Cutler, treats a subject of abiding interest to Kazhdan, a concept to which he returned often. He was a passionate believer in ambiguities, ambivalences, and contradictions, which he thought were what made Byzantium dynamic.

Kazhdan's most important initiative at Dumbarton Oaks was his intellectual leadership of the seven-year project (1984–1991) to produce *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*. Several plans for dictionaries or encyclopedias of Byzantine civilization had been proposed, and even launched, in the decades between 1950 and 1980, but none was ever realized in full. Kazhdan developed the practicable idea of a concise dictionary written by a limited number of contributors, and his plan worked. He never wavered in his confidence that the *ODB* would and could be completed, and set everyone an example by his single-minded devotion to the project. He wrote a remarkable 20 percent of the *ODB*—1,000 entries in all—and reviewed all 5,000 entries (rewriting many of them), a truly heroic effort. No other scholar could have written on such diverse fields as hagiography, history, prosopography, the papacy, literature, and bureaucracy. In this project, as in all others, he put to excellent use the astonishing amount of substantive and bibliographic information he had collected on his small, flimsy cards, organized in a system that resembled a personal computer long before the advent of that machine.

In the final years of his life, when many scholars are thinking of retirement, Kazhdan embarked upon two further projects. One was the preparation of a computerized database of the *realia* to be found in saints' Lives of the eighth to tenth centuries. His dream

⁶*Byzantion* 52 (1982), 429–78.

of having his “little cards” on hagiography made searchable and accessible was realized a few months after his death. A second ambitious project was a new *History of Byzantine Literature*, on which he worked with Lee Sherry. This was envisaged as a work in six volumes, covering the period from the seventh to the twelfth century. On the day of his death, Kazhdan mailed a revised version of the first two volumes to Athens for publication, and a third volume was near completion.

During the 1990s, Kazhdan’s interest in literature became all-encompassing. One of his more provocative ideas was that Byzantine literature, much maligned, is interesting in itself, not just as a source of historical evidence. He argued that it should be read as literature, and that sometimes it even has aesthetic value. That idea, too, derives from his basic premise that the society that produced it was a new society, with its own rules and its own canons and form of beauty. In this, as in everything else, Alexander Kazhdan had a broad conceptual and interpretative schema, based on exhaustive reading of the sources.

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